Secondary use of mystery visitor data from a consumer organisation to assess
general practitioners performance.

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Background
To improve general practitioners (GP) service quality their actual
performance level has to be assessed. Direct observation of routine GP
performance USING actors is an established method in quality management.
Consumer organizations frequently assess the quality of services in various
industries through USE OF mystery shoppers. the use of data collected in this
way by consumer organizations may provide a new low cost evaluation method.

Methods
We gathered data from a consumer organization's assessment of GPs preventive
care in Vienna, Austria. We examined this data to determine how
representative, reliable and valid it was in evaluating quality on the
regional service level. We judged representative ness by comparing
characteristics of the GP sample with administrative data.
Reliability and validity of data were assessed by analysing the measurements
methods of the consumer organisation.

Results
The 42 mystery visits were a reliable and valid form of data collection. The
GP sample was well balanced in regard to catchment area and GP insurance
status. The sample size was in the range reported by a recent systematic
review on studies using incognito standardised patients. First analysis
showed that GP communication time of 46 minutes (95% CI 37–54 minutes
exceeded expectations. However in less than half of visits (38%, CI 19% –
56%) history taking was performed at acceptable levels.

Conclusions
Data from mystery visits by consumer organizations may provide a new low cost
source of evidence on GP performance. Analysis of the secondary dataset
allowed 95 performance variables per visit crucial aspects of preventive care
to be assessed. Where other systematic data on health service performance are
not available, data from consumer organisations may provide evidence to
evaluate and further improve preventive GP service delivery in a region.